

Dozens of House members rally to protest what they call the rush to war with Iraq

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MADELEINE BRAND, host:

While senators were talking about Iraq inside the Capitol yesterday, more than two dozen House members rallied on the lawn outside to protest what they called the rush to war. They said they spoke for the segment of the American public that doesn't want the US to act unilaterally against Iraq. NPR's Andrea Seabrook reports.

ANDREA SEABROOK reporting:

One representative said the United States is going from a defender of democracy to a first strike aggressor. Another said a world of pre-emptive strikes is a world of perpetual war. There were 26 representatives at this rally, all now publicly opposed to the House resolution authorizing force against Iraq. And they say their numbers are growing. Texas Democrat Sheila Jackson Lee. Representative SHEILA JACKSON LEE (Democrat, Texas): If you pierce the veil of unanimity on this question, you will find out that there is great opposition to this war.

SEABROOK: Several congressmen said they want the Defense Department to focus on the war on terrorism. Others, like Vermont Independent Bernard Sanders, say action against Iraq would be too expensive.

Representative BERNARD SANDERS (Independent, Vermont): With a \$6 trillion national debt and a growing deficit, with cuts in Medicare, at a time when veterans can't even get treatment in a VA hospital, this operation in Iraq could cost the American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars, and I think that that is unnecessary.

SEABROOK: And Jim Moran of Virginia, who set himself apart from the others by saying he voted for every increase in defense appropriations, says he cannot now support the president's new policy of pre-emptive unilateral strikes.

Representative JIM MORAN (Virginia): That has implications for the rest of the world that are very likely to come back to haunt us.

SEABROOK: For instance, many representatives asked, if the United States doesn't abide by international law, why shouldn't China feel free to invade Taiwan or India Kashmir? But the protesting members were united in their belief that the US should only act with United Nations'

support. They also contend that plenty of Americans agree with them.

Representative JAN SCHAKOWSKY (Democrat, Illinois): I bring to you the communications that I have gotten by mail or e-mail from my district.

SEABROOK: Illinois Democrat Jan Schakowsky waves a handful of printed pages in the air.

Rep. SCHAKOWSKY: These are in support of the president's resolution for unilateral pre-emptive strike on Iraq.

SEABROOK: And then Schakowsky heaves a foot-thick bundle onto the podium.

Rep. SCHAKOWSKY: And this is the mail that I've gotten against from my district.

(Soundbite of applause and cheers)

SEABROOK: Several other representatives said they're receiving 10:1, even 18:1 ratios of constituent letters against unilateral action on Iraq. But that doesn't explain the meager turnout at peace demonstrations in Washington last weekend or the polls that show most Americans support action against Saddam Hussein. Ohio Democrat Dennis Kucinich says most Americans don't understand that the resolution before Congress would allow the president to disregard international law. Kucinich says the legislative process has gone so fast, many constituents may think Mr. Bush already has UN approval.

Representative DENNIS KUCINICH (Democrat, Ohio): Well, you've got to remember, it's only been a few days that we even knew there was going to be a vote, and it's only been 24 hours that we knew there was going to be a resolution and we knew the language of it. So as the American people come to understand that we're looking at a vote for war that would give the president authority to conduct a unilateral action and a pre-emptive strike that would change the nature of what this government is about, I think you're going to have millions of people calling.

SEABROOK: The members urged citizens to call their own representatives, and some are working with peace groups planning demonstrations in San Francisco and Washington, DC, for the last weekend of this month. Andrea Seabrook, NPR News, Washington.

BRAND: The time is 19 minutes past the hour.